

# EMIGRANT LIFE ON THE TRAIL

**SUMMARY:** Students prepare costumes and props, and then act out mini-plays portraying various aspects of emigrant life on the trail.

**GOAL:** For students to gain an understanding of the daily chores and responsibilities of emigrant life along the trail to California

**OBJECTIVES:** Students will be able to (1) Describe daily chores of emigrant life and (2) Compare these chores to their own chores today.

**GRADE LEVEL:** Fourth, fifth, and seventh

**TIME REQUIRED:** Four hours (two in the classroom and two at Lassen)

**LOCATION:** Classroom and Lassen Volcanic National Park

**MATERIALS:** Large pieces of cardboard, sheets of butcher paper, paints or crayons, pencils, clothing and props from home (optional), scripts of mini-plays (included with activity), books visually depicting emigrant life (optional), and video camera (optional).

**SUBJECTS:** History, Social Science, Drama, Art

**KEY WORDS:** Emigrant, Responsibilities, Chores

**BACKGROUND:** Lassen Volcanic National Park has a rich pioneer history. Approximately 23 miles of the historic Nobles Emigrant Trail run through the park. Many of the emigrants traveling to California and specifically into Northern California used this trail. Students are asked to depict scenes from emigrant trail life. The short scripts and mini-plays portray some of the responsibilities and chores of daily trail life. Hopefully, the mini-plays will share moments of what life was really like for those traveling the long and hazardous trail to California.

Library, or textbooks with pictures of life on the trail would be useful. Reading appropriate excerpts from any of the following books can help "set the stage." Nobles' Emigrant Trail by Robert Amesbury, Covered Wagon Days by Lucy Rutledge Cooke, The Overland Migrations by the National Park Service (Handbook 105), Oregon Trail, The Story Behind The Scenery by Dan Murphy, and The California Trail by George R. Stewart.

## INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE:

### PART I - CLASSROOM

1. Share the following information with your class:

Many of the emigrants who came to California via the Nobles Trail were not newcomers to moving. Some were restless adventurers, others kept moving farther and farther west in

search of the ideal homestead. However, their early moves had been through semi-settled land. This last move was through harsh and unsettled lands and involved greater distances and hardships. Luckily, most emigrants were accustomed to hard physical work from homestead life, so they were well prepared for the tough physical work of trail life.

Wagon trains were like small villages on the move. A good day of travel was fifteen miles. The rest of the daylight hours were spent setting up and taking down camp, as well as daily chores. Labor was divided up, and everyone had to do their share. Men usually did all the work associated with moving the animals and livestock, herding the cattle, hunting, and fishing. The women took care of the food, laundry, small children, and cleaning. Older children helped their parents with all chores. The lines between men's and women's work became blurry on the trail. By necessity, whoever was able to do it, had to.

By the time the emigrants reached what is now Lassen Volcanic National Park, they were near the end of many months of hardships and adventures. They had experienced excessive heat, extreme cold, wet weather, dry deserts, blowing winds, hunger, fear of the unknown, the loss of almost everything they knew or had, sickness, and maybe even the death of loved ones. There were also good times, beautiful scenery, newborn babies, marriages, new friendships, and proud feelings of accomplishment. Through it all they had worked hard just to survive. The class will have the opportunity to experience small pieces of emigrant life.

2. Divide the class into groups of five students. There are five parts in each mini-play. This is adjustable as are the scripts.
3. Give each group a script for one mini-play and have them read through it. Each student picks a part. Each mini-play will be about two to three minutes long. After familiarizing themselves with their scripts, students can add additional lines or actions. Students should try to be creative and personalize their plays as much as possible.
4. Have each group discuss different props they could use to make their play more realistic. Suggestions include but are not limited to (a) murals on butcher paper which can be hung up between two trees (remember to bring string and scissors), (b) scenes on large pieces of cardboard that can have the sides folded back so that the piece will stand up, and (c) props and costumes brought from home. Reading through the scripts will give you more ideas.
5. Give groups adequate time to design, make, and collect their props.
6. Teachers may want to use extra students or students who are shy to help with costumes, props, and cameras.
7. On the day after props have been made and collected, students should go outside, weather permitting, to practice their mini-plays. Have them spread out on the playground so that they will not interfere with each other. They should go through their mini-play a number of times until they are familiar with their parts.
8. If performing this activity at Lassen, have each group carefully package their scripts and props in a box to be taken on the field trip to the park.

9. If your class is unable to perform their plays at Lassen, then any other state, county, or city park could be used. Schools can also use their own school grounds and may wish to invite other classes or parents to watch.

10. If time allows, students can play emigrant games.

NOTE: When all the work was done, and if they had enough daylight and energy, emigrant children often played games. Since they were not able to bring much with them, they had to use their imaginations. Here are some of the simple games they played.

"Indians in their tipi's"

Break the class into groups of 10 to 15 students and have them stand in a circle. Pick one student to read the following rhyme, pointing to a different player with each word. The rhyme should be repeated twice. The player that is pointed to on the last word, the last round, is the Indian "it."

Heater, beater, Peter mine,  
Hey Betty Martin, tiptoe fine,  
Higgledy-piggledy, up the spout,  
Tip him, turn him, round about,  
One, two, three;  
Out goes he!

Another jingling rhyme which can be used:

One-ery, two-ery, hickory Han,  
Phillisy, follisy, Nicholas John;  
Spinkum, spankum, winkum, wankum,  
Twiddlum, twaddlum, twenty-one.  
O-U-T, out,  
With a white dish-clout-out!

The chosen Indian draws circles on the ground. These are tipi's to hold the players who are caught. Meanwhile, the other students will be the emigrants and chose a base. This can be a rock or tree and is their safe wagon. The Indian tries to tag (catch) the emigrants. The emigrant caught, stands in a tipi circle. They cannot escape unless tagged by another free emigrant. Once an emigrant is freed, the Indian can not catch him again until he has returned and tagged his wagon base. The Indian can, however, tag the emigrant who set the captured one free. The last emigrant to be caught is the Indian for the next round.

"Hop, Step, Jump!"

Divide the group into groups of five students. Each student picks a rock or small stick to be used as a marker later. Each group draws a line on the dirt, and then stands in a line behind it.

Taking turns, one person goes through the complete Hop, Step, Jump sequence before another group member starts. The first student in each group takes one hop, landing on one foot, making sure his/her raised foot does not touch the ground. When the student is balanced, he/she takes a giant step with the raised foot. Finally, the student jumps with both

feet together, marking the spot with his/her rock or stick marker. Continue in this manner, giving each group member a chance. The winner is the one who went the farthest. Note: If desired, have all the group winners compete against each other, continuing until you have a class winner.

Other games which can be played are "Hide and Seek," "Kick The Can" (or pine cone), and "Tag." Challenge the students to think of other games to play.

## **PART II - MINI-PLAY PERFORMANCE**

This activity can be done at a number of locations at Lassen. An excellent location to begin this activity and park a school bus is the turnout just south of the Emigrant Trailhead on the Lassen Park Road. At this spot is a historical marker commemorating the Nobles' Emigrant Trail and a huge open area ideal for the mini-plays; it is located just off the Nobles' trail and was most likely a campsite for the early travelers. Other possible locations include Manzanita Picnic Area, Emigrant Pass at the Devastated Area, Lost Creek Campground, Butte Lake Picnic Area, or the Southwest Campground.

1. Gather students in the open area. Divide them into the same mini-play teams used to practice in the classroom. Give each team their scripts and prop box from the classroom preparation.
2. Define the area you want them to stay in. Give all groups 15 minutes to set up their props, get costumes on, and rehearse if desired.
3. When all groups are ready, gather the class back together. Decide the order to view mini-plays. (This could be done before the field trip.)
4. View each mini-play together as a class. Hopefully you will be able to videotape each play for classroom viewing later. Photographs can also be taken and used for a bulletin board display in the classroom or for open house.
5. After each mini-play is presented, discuss the various aspects of emigrant life that were portrayed. Compare the chores done on the trail with chores that are done today. What are some similarities? What are some differences?

**NOTE:** Much of the dialogue in these plays comes from actual pioneer journal entries!

## **EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT:**

Students make up their own mini-plays, or modify these to meet their own interests. Ask families to share any artifacts or diaries they have. Have students research how their families came to California. Research emigrant or pioneer chores such as cooking, washing, candle-making, weaving, spinning, patchwork, fire-making, soap making, blacksmithing, etc. Students can make up other scripts dealing with music and evening entertainment, gathering water, bathing, night duty, meeting Indians, and storytelling either to children around the campfire or to another wagon train met on the trail. This is a good way to share interesting tales you come across in research.

**ASSESSMENT:** Have students describe three daily chores done by emigrants while traveling on the trail. Compare chores that were done on the trail with chores they do now. What are some similarities? What are some differences?

### MEAL PREPARATION SCENE

**Actors:** Mother, 12 year-old Sue, Widow Sarah, 8 year-old William, 3 year-old John, baby (use doll)

**Scene:** Mother is stirring a pot and tending the cooking fire, John playing hand games with Sue, baby lying on blanket watching, Widow Sarah mending clothes, William sulking in the background, then teasing Sue and John.

**Mother:** I sure appreciate your help, Sarah.

**Widow Sarah:** Working together has sure made it easier for both of us. I don't think I could do this by myself, with Frank gone. (Sighs) I sure miss him.

**Sue:** Mother, please tell William to stop!

**Mother:** William, if you don't stop, you'll get the switch. I'm too tired to have to talk to you about your behavior.

**William:** (Coming over to the fire) I just wanted to play too. When are we going to get there? I'm tired of traveling. It's so much the same every day. I want to be there. I thought we were in California already.

**Mother:** We are. We just have a few more days. I know it's hard to be so close. Go find some willow sticks to cook the bacon on.

**William:** Yes, Mother. (Hesitates) I'm hungry. When is dinner going to be ready? I can't wait to eat something besides bacon and biscuits. It doesn't taste good any more. At least we get beans tonight!

**Widow Sarah:** I think I smell something. (William looks at the baby and runs off to get the sticks.)

**Sue:** I'll check the biscuits. (Quickly lifts lid of Dutch oven so coals don't fall on biscuits) They are almost done. I'll get everything ready for dinner. (Looks at baby out of corner of her eyes and looks very busy getting eating utensils set up on top of a barrel. Meanwhile, John grabs a dishcloth and starts pretending to wash it in a nearby water bucket.)

**Mother:** (Goes to pick baby up and change diaper) Okay, Charles, I'll see what I can do for you.

**Widow Sarah:** Thank goodness we're near water again so you can wash the diapers.

**Mother:** Yes, remember when we were in the desert and didn't have much water? I didn't like just drying the diapers, then scraping them, and airing them out. But what choice did we have? At home I would wash diapers every other day. But there were so many days on the trail that we just didn't have the water to spare.

**Widow Sarah:** I heard that the Indians used dried moss and grasses. That would sure make it easy, at least when there is grass.

**Mother:** (Putting baby down and stirring dinner) It's hard to believe we're almost done with this traveling. I find myself looking forward to cooking on a stove again. It will seem so easy.

**Widow Sarah:** I can hardly believe that when we started this journey, I couldn't cook on an open fire. I couldn't even get the kettle to stand up straight and I always had smoke in my eyes and ashes in the food.

**Sue:** Remember that sandstorm that came on while we were cooking in the desert? You could hardly recognize anyone our faces were so dirty. I thought I was going to die when James walked by and saw me like that! And the food, no one could eat it with all that sand in it. We had to throw it away and make more!

**Mother:** I remember trying to cook in that terrible hailstorm, the one that seemed to last forever and had those huge hailstones. I couldn't stand being pelted so hard and went into the wagon. By the time I came out the beans were burned.

**John:** I remember the yummy berries we collected. (Still playing in the water bucket with the rag)

**William:** (Returning with willow sticks) I remember the fresh buffalo meat. I'd sure like some right now. Hey, what is John doing? (They all look over and gasp.)

**Mother:** Oh, no! He's washing the dirty, soapy dishrag in our drinking water.

**John smiles, scene over.**

## **BOYS GATHERING FIREWOOD**

**Actors:** Matt, David, Milton, Sam, Caleb

**Scene:** Boys walking through woods collecting wood, stopping to chat.

**Matt:** This place is pretty nice, huh? I like it here and there's plenty of wood. Pretty too.

**David:** Yes, I hope where we're going in California will be as nice as this. I like all these big trees!

**Milton:** There weren't any trees like these in Illinois.

**Sam:** They look especially good after all that barren desert. I thought we'd never get across.

**Caleb:** I was afraid that California was going to look like that.

**Matt:** I thought we were never going to collect wood again.

**David:** How come?

**Milton:** I know! You thought we were going to have to cook on buffalo dung forever.

**(Boys all laugh)**

**Sam:** It did work to cook the food but I sure didn't like collecting it. I guess I'm glad it was there though since there weren't any trees.

**Caleb:** I got used to it. I could gather a bushel in a minute.

**Matt:** Yea, me too. Too bad it took three bushels to make a good cooking fire.

**David:** I couldn't believe my Mom. She didn't take kindly to having to cook over buffalo and cow dung. It's the only time I ever heard her swear.

**Milton:** My Mama didn't mind so much. She said they made a good fire.

**Sam:** I was glad to have the stuff around when we were in mosquito country. Those dung smudge pots sure kept the mosquitoes and gnats back.

**Caleb:** My Mother would light one of those buffalo chips and put it in our wagon. It smelled bad but we could stand it longer than the bugs!

**Matt:** Hey, there's a lot of dead branches over there!



**David:** I hope it's some of that manzanita. That stuff burns nice and hot.

**Milton:** That would be great, then maybe we won't have to get so much.

**Sam:** Let's get a good load anyway so we can have a longer fire.

**Caleb:** Yea, I hear we might have music and stories tonight. Let's go.

**Boys all head off,** scene over.



## WOMEN WASHING

**Actors:** Agnes, Catherine, Lavinia, Helen, Mary

**Scene:** Near a stream's edge, flat rocks along the shore, women in various stages of washing. They should be tending to one or more of the following chores--sorting clothes, tending the fire, scrubbing clothes on rocks or washboard, stirring clothes in a washtub with a broom handle, taking them out of tubs of "boiling" water, hanging clothes on bushes or laying them out on grass. Talking while they work.

**Agnes:** I certainly will be glad to get this job done. Just think, this might be the last time we have to do this on the trail. Next time we might be in civilization.

**Lavinia:** Well, we still don't know how civilized things will be in California. And we don't know if we'll be there in two weeks. We've heard so many stories that I don't know what to believe anymore.

**Catherine:** Don't let yourself get discouraged. I believe we truly are almost there. Look on the bright side. Doing the wash in California couldn't be any harder than what we've been doing on the trail.

**Helen:** That's for sure. I've gotten to really dread this job. I didn't even like it back in Missouri. I thought it took a lot of time then. What I wouldn't give for the good old days.

**Mary:** At least we have a stream nearby to wash in today. That's an improvement. We don't have to carry the water so far.

**Agnes:** I never thought I was going to get our clothes clean again. Having to do everything in one pot--heat the water, wash and boil everything, then rinse.

**Lavinia:** I always prided myself in keeping my family clean and neatly dressed. Sometimes I get so discouraged and frustrated!

**Catherine:** Now, Lavinia, calm down. I'm sure your whites will sparkle again in your new home.

**Helen:** At least the water here is not so hard as it was at our last wash stop two weeks ago. That washing took all my strength and a huge amount of my soap. Even then, the clothes did not come out looking clean.

**Mary:** Just think about how much dirt is in these clothes! What with not doing the laundry but every two weeks, the long, hot, dusty days on the trail, and the endless chores, why, there must be ground dirt in every fiber!

**Agnes:** You're right. We should feel good about what we are able to do under these conditions.

**Lavinia:** Well, I still don't like having to work this hard and then having to lay the cleaned clothes on the grass or a bush to dry. The worst is when they don't dry and I have to hang them all over the wagon while we are traveling. They get dirty again before we even wear them.

**Catherine:** I don't think I would advise anyone who comes west to wear white, or for that matter, anything fancy. Plain, simple cut calico dresses are much more practical. They don't show the dirt as much. Remember that frilly white dress you bought, Helen. It's brown now!

**Helen:** Yes, I'm going to write my sister, who hopes to come out next year, and tell her to bring pillows and clothing made in dark calico and colored sheets.

**Mary:** I know one advantage of doing the wash on this trip.

**All others:** What?

**Mary:** No ironing!

**Laughter,** end scene.

## SETTING UP CAMP

**Actors:** George, Jessy, Peter, Henry, Lowell

**Scene:** George and Peter working on a broken wagon wheel, Jessy and Henry setting up a tent, and Lowell digging a trench around the tents. (Remember, everything is protected in a national park, Lowell just pretends to dig!) They are talking while working.

**George:** I don't think this old wagon will make it much longer. It's taken a beating.

**Jessy:** The road in some places is much rougher than we were lead to believe. I'm not so sure all those guides who wrote those books actually traveled the trail, at least not with wagons.

**Peter:** I think you're right. These trails wouldn't look so bad on horseback.

**Henry:** Thank goodness the last part of this trail hasn't been so bad. Once we left the desert we've been making good time.

**Lowell:** Well, from what I hear, this is by far the easiest way to get over the Sierra Nevada range and into California.

**George:** I talked to one man who was headed back east and he said he had been over the Sierra Nevada in seven places and this was the only one with a natural good pass.

**Jessy:** I heard that on some of the passes, they actually had to unload the wagons and carry everything to the top, walk the oxen up, then attach the oxen to the wagons by long ropes and chains. The poor men and oxen worked together to pull those wagons up cliffs!

**Peter:** Sounds like a lot of extra work. I'm glad we found out about this route.

**Henry:** Darn, looks like we've run out of decent wheel pegs. I'll find a piece of wood and carve another one. (Looks around, finds 9-inch stick about 1-inch thick, pretends to whittle the end to a point)

**Lowell:** I'll just keep digging this ditch. It looks like it might rain tonight. (Works around the spot where Henry just left)

**George:** We appreciate your helping us and digging around our tents. Last rain storm I didn't have time to dig a trench around my tent and everything got soaking wet. Even hanging it up in the wagon all day didn't dry it out.

**Jessy:** We're lucky, the wife and I can sleep on top of the goods in the wagon if we need to. There's been enough rain to make me glad we had that option.

**Peter:** We sure can't fit in our wagon, just too much stuff. We can only get one of the kids in at a time.

**Henry:** There, I'm done with one. I'll make a couple more.

**Lowell:** I'm glad I brought as many tools with me as I did. I know they'll come in handy on my homestead.

**George:** I'm glad you brought them too. Otherwise I'd have a harder time fixing this here wheel.

**Jessy:** Looks like the rest of the wagons are completing the circle. We can let the livestock feed outside of the wagons for awhile before letting them into the circle. It sure helped me to sleep easier in Indian country knowing that the livestock was surrounded by our wagons.

**Peter:** Guess I'll go over and start unharnessing the other horse now that we have this wheel almost finished. (He heads over and starts unsaddling.)

**Henry:** Tents are up, we're ready for rain. I'm going down to the stream to start bringing water up.

**Lowell:** Take a little rinse off while you're there. You could use it!

End scene.

## HUNTING, SCOUTING

**Actors:** Joseph (16 years old), Erwin (father), Irene (17 years old), Elizabeth (15 years old), Margaret (13 years old)

**Scene:** Walking, then stopping, looking around and crouching behind bushes.

**Irene:** I hope we find a deer. I'd sure like to taste some fresh meat, Father.

**Erwin:** Me too, honey. You girls keep a sharp look out.

**Joseph:** I can't believe you taught your girls how to hunt.

**Margaret:** And why not, Joseph? We can hunt just as well as you can!

**Irene:** Now Margaret, don't get so uppity. All of our friends back home would think it was unusual too. How many of your friends would even think about going out and hunting?

**Margaret:** I know. It might mess their frilly dresses up. I'm sure glad we haven't had to wear anything like that for awhile. I like wearing these bloomers and don't want to go back to dresses.

**Irene:** Bloomers sure are more practical to work in but they don't look very feminine!

**Elizabeth:** Shh! I heard something. (They stop and listen) It's nothing I guess.

**Erwin:** There doesn't seem to be much game here.

**Joseph:** Certainly nothing like there was on the prairies. There weren't as many buffalo as I thought there would be, but there was enough to get by. I sure had heard a lot of stories about vast herds.

**Margaret:** Father, let's go to the top of that little hill, maybe we can see something from there. (They walk up hill.)

**Joseph:** Look at that river drainage. Are we going to follow that?

**Erwin:** We'll mention it to our guide. That might even be the trail. Look out west. That's where our new home will be. Maybe there will be more game there.

**Margaret:** I hear that there lots of ducks to be had in the winter. Someone told me that when a big flock flies overhead, it will blot the sun out for fifteen minutes.

**Elizabeth:** Look, deer tracks. (They gather around a "track.")

**Irene:** I have to admit, I'm glad they're not bear tracks. I want fresh meat but I'm not sure I want to take on a bear. The man we met last night said they have huge bears here in California.

**Joseph:** Let's follow them. (They follow tracks for a minute.)

**Irene:** Darn, they go right into this heavy brush.

**Erwin:** It's getting late. I think we'll have bacon for dinner again tonight. Let's head back.

**Margaret:** I sure hope we have better luck tomorrow.

(They leave to head back to camp.)